

A Sheep's Eye View sermon series
#4 – My Cup Overflows
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Kory Wilcoxson

As I study this psalm in preparation for these sermons, I'm continually amazed at the skill and knowledge of the author, King David. He had the ability to look at his life and see the connections between his daily routines and God's constant presence. Can we think about washing dishes or carpooling kids or running errands and see God at work? That's what David was able to do with his experience as a shepherd.

Last week in this sermon series, we journeyed with the shepherd and his flock as they made their way up the mountain to the prime grazing lands. In order to get to those lush meadows, they had to go through valleys filled with danger and shadows. And yet, the shepherd was with the sheep the entire way.

In our verse today, the sheep have arrived at the all-you-can-eat grass buffet. These flat surfaces for grazing in the midst of the mountain peaks were often called tablelands. The shepherd and his flock would spend much of the summer feeding here, until the weather started turning cold and forced them back down the mountain.

These tablelands were excellent spots for grazing, but that didn't happen naturally. In order for these meadows to be safe for the sheep, the shepherd had to do a lot of prep work. He would go up before the sheep arrived and spread salts and minerals around the tableland for the sheep's benefit. He would clear watering holes of any debris.

What required the most amount of work was checking for poisonous weeds and plants in the meadow. W. Phillip Keller, a pastor and sheep rancher, said he would spend hours on his hands and knees picking out little blue flowers that would kill any sheep that ate it. He said the sheep didn't know any better; they'd try anything that came their way. So as the shepherd, it was his job to prepare the tablelands for them.

This is an awesome metaphor for God's role in our lives. Christ, our Good Shepherd, goes before us in every situation, anticipating the dangers we may encounter, helping us deal with them. Isn't it true that often times we aren't strong enough or smart enough to say "no," and will try whatever comes our way? Haven't we all made decisions that, in hindsight, probably weren't the best decisions? That is a part of being human, and the truth is we need the protection and guidance of the Good Shepherd. That's why we pray, "Lead me not into temptation."

But the truth is that the enemy is not always held at bay. Scripture talks about Satan as "a roaring lion, ready to devour." Keller talked about how his flocks would be attacked by cougars, which would inflict terrible damage on his sheep. And yet those predators were so cunning he never actually saw one, only the aftermath of their destruction.

I believe there are forces at work in our lives that operate the same way. Whether it's Satan or evil or our own human weakness, we are easily tempted toward thoughts and behaviors and choices that cause damage to ourselves and others, and often we aren't even aware of it until we see the aftermath. Lent is a time for us to take a look at these areas in our lives and become more aware of our complicity in them.

That's why we need a Good Shepherd, someone who goes before us and either clears the way or gives us the strength to endure. Christ has already ventured into the

dark places – into the agony of Gethsemane, the humiliation of his trial, the suffering of the cross.

Whatever tough times we face, we can know that Christ has gone before us. And in the midst of his enemies, he prepared a table for us, a table with bread and with a cup, a meal that nourishes us to give us strength and assurance as we move forward from this place into the danger-filled world around us.

But that meal is not the only way our Good Shepherd protects his sheep. As we follow God, life is not always easy. Even in the midst of green meadows and cool waters, there can still be a fly in the ointment. While summer time was the best time for sheep to be fed and taken care of, it was also known as “fly time.” That means the summer was the prime season for all kinds of bugs and insects, and this presented a serious problem for the shepherd and his sheep.

The list of pests is almost endless: warble flies, bot flies, heel flies, pop flies, time flies, French flies. One insidious example is the nose fly, which would actually lay eggs in the mucous membrane lining of a sheep’s nose. When they hatched, the larvae would burrow into the sheep’s flesh, literally getting under their skin, and cause intense inflammation and irritation. These parasites became so annoying that sheep would beat their heads against rocks and trees to try and find relief.

To counteract this disruptive invasion, the shepherd had to act fast. At the first sign of flies, the shepherd would apply a homemade remedy to the sheep’s heads made of linseed oil, sulfur, and tar. It was the ancient equivalent of insect repellent.

Do you see the connection? We’re more like sheep than we want to admit. Sometimes in our lives, things that bug us can get under our skin and causes us to beat our heads against the wall in frustration. When that happens, we need anointing.

Another behavior of sheep that required the application of oil was their tendency to be affectionate. Sheep would often rub heads with each other as a way of saying, “How YOU doing?” But if one sheep had infected skin, it would pass the infection on to the other. Associating with others who are infected – with negativity, with gossip, with anything contrary to the Christian life – can lead to our own infections. When that happens, we need anointing.

The shepherd would also often be forced to apply oil to protect the sheep from themselves. As you may know, sheep will fight for territorial rights by slamming their heads together in a show of power and authority. The best butter would be the winner, but not only could the sheep suffer “dain bramage,” but the whole harmony and tranquility of the flock could be disrupted by the conflict.

So the shepherd would apply oil to the heads of the clashing sheep, so that when they butted heads, they slipped right off each other without doing any major damage. This would not only protect the sheep, but would also diffuse the conflict and keep the peace. Sometimes we sheep find ourselves at odds with each other, butting heads in such a way that does damage to our relationship and disrupts the harmony around us. When that happens, we need anointing.

What does this anointing mean in our lives? It simply means time spent with God. For the sheep, having their heads anointed with oil wasn’t a one-time application. The shepherd would have to consistently apply the oil for it to stay effective. Likewise, consistent time spent with God – in conversation and prayer, in scripture reading, in worship – can be an anointing for us that protects us from external pests, negative

influences, and our own conflicts. Time spent with God brings relief from the things that bug us, and helps us become the kind of sheep God has called us to be. Time spent with God helps us live what Keller calls “the overcoming Christian life.”

That time spent with God also makes us aware of the abundance of blessings we have. When we live “the overcoming Christian life,” we experience life to the full. Our cups overflow with blessings. Jesus says in John 10, the chapter about the Good Shepherd, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

Keller said that when his sheep would get caught in a storm, he would often have to keep a close eye on the lambs, which could easily become chilled from the rain. He kept a mixture of brandy and water that he would feed to them to help them stay warm and restore their energy.

Christ watches over us in the same way, and has poured out his own blood for us to help warm our spirits and restore us. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed and asked, “God, if you wish, take this cup from me,” the cup that represented suffering and pain. But through his faithfulness, Christ has turned that cup of suffering into a cup of blessing, which now overflows for each and every one of us.

When we come to this table to eat this bread and drink this cup, we receive from our Good Shepherd the nourishment, the anointing, the blessing we need to live the lives we’ve been called to live.

And we are blessed, aren’t we? That’s what the season of Lent is supposed to help us understand, to realize that we have been blessed beyond measure, not through any effort of our own, but through the graciousness of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. We haven’t earned all our blessings; they have been gifted to us. And in response, we are called to offer our lives as a gift in return, to be used by the Good Shepherd to help bring others into the flock. When we think of how our cups overflow, how can we keep from giving thanks?